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Kjetil Tronvoll and Daniel R. Mekonnen (2014), *The African Garrison State: Human Rights and Political Development in Eritrea*, Rochester, NY: James Currey, ISBN-10: 1847010695, 223 pp.

Andebrhan Welde Giorgis (2014), *Eritrea at a Crossroads: A Narrative of Triumph, Betrayal and Hope*, Houston, TX: Strategic Book Publishing, ISBN-10: 1628573317, 692 pp.

Eritrea will soon commemorate, much less than celebrate, the 24th anniversary of its independence. Its de facto birth against all odds in 1991 evoked not only international admiration, but also hopes that its war-time discipline and steadfastness would make a miracle of postwar nation-building.

These books are a requiem for those buried hopes, critically lamenting the disastrous path Eritrea has since travelled. They are an autopsy of policies that rendered Eritrea the fresh epitome of African state tragedy. Tronvoll and Mekonnen lucidly examine pretentions for a transition to democracy, capped by a brutal crackdown on dissent in 2001, and the politico-legal ramifications of a "garrison state": a thoroughly militarized society, "rule of law(lessness)" and grotesque human rights abuses "amounting to crimes against humanity" (187). A disillusioned former freedom fighter, Giorgis presents a sweeping history of Eritrea's quest for freedom and a dispassionate account of betrayed promises, a glaring "disconnect in policy and practice" in purported nation-building (325), and utter failures in matters ranging from economic self-reliance (196) and political openness (272) to a dismal diplomacy that caused the country to become embroiled in regional conflicts (516) and brought it into the fold of Security Council sanctions. The authors of both books insightfully scrutinize major post-liberation policy instruments, as well as the contradictions in the ruling EPLF/PFDJ's prophesied commitment to democracy versus its deeply engrained authoritarian values, which left Eritrea "neither democratic nor developmental".

At the backdrop of this dynamic lay an indelible legacy: the EPLF/PFDJ's anti-democratic political culture and the autocratic leadership style of its sole post-independence leader, Isaias Afworki. Liberation-era principles of the front – democratic centralism, secrecy and discipline – that heavily characterized the postwar political arena are profoundly inimical to democratic ideals. Contrary to liberal theory, for instance, the Charter defines democracy in terms of "patriotism, national unity, secularism and social justice" (Tronvoll and Mekonnen, 62), and cautions against seeing it relative to "the number of political parties" (ibid., 59), regular elections and basic freedoms. The transition period was beset by

these contradictions; deep beneath a rhetoric of democracy, authoritarian impulses were taking root and structures of social control were being systematically embedded (ibid., 72). This insidious historical baggage was exacerbated by Isaias's own lust for absolute power, aversion to institutional constraints, and brute force against any dissent. Corresponding to the de-democratization process during the transition was a consolidation of Isaias's personal power, paralysing formal state institutions and supplanting them with shadowy organizations and power centres answerable to a single person.

The state that was moulded in this process was a far cry from what was envisioned, but more complex than the authors' theoretical approaches. Tronvoll and Mekonnen's concept of a "garrison state" underscores the state's militaristic aspect – a militarized society and foreign policy. Giorgis captures its other feature, neopatrimonialism: a "big man" ruling by decree, a state treated as his private property, extensive patronage and bureaucratic inefficiency. Giorgis laudably casts Eritrea in a broader historical context of the postcolonial African state that was marked by the centralization of power and rise of personal rule. The personalization of power is so consummate that Eritrea today lacks even the most "rudimentary principles" of rule of law and publicly accountable institutions (Tronvoll and Mekonnen, 15). A constitution ratified in 1997 has never been implemented, the National Assembly last convened in 2002 to rubber-stamp a presidential decree to shelve the constitution and a draft electoral law (40), while the judiciary exists as a mere "instrument of control" (47). Although the PFDJ has been the sole legal party, Isaias allowed the liberation front and its collective leadership to atrophy, turning it into an effective tool of oppression. Ironically, it convened its last congress in 1994 and has existed since 2001 without its central and executive organs following the crackdown on a reformist faction known as the G-15. A one-time liberation hero but widely and deeply despised today, Isaias runs the tiny nation as his personal fiefdom with a degree of fear that earned him the infamous appellation of *eti diablos* (Tigrigna for the "devil"). He rules not only by brute force but also through a Mobutu-style breeding of ceaseless instability and power struggles among his subordinates blended with Félix Houphouët-Boigny's art of buying legitimacy by granting privileged access and clientelistic distribution of state resources to the *tegadelti* (former freedom fighters) and a few civilian supporters. Isaias mercilessly punishes disloyalty by liquidation and temporary "freezing" – dishonourable dismissal of officials from active duty.

Giorgis's *Eritrea at a Crossroads* offers an insider's view – the author was a top diplomat before his fallout with Isaias in 2005 – of the policy that failed to avoid an "avoidable" war with Ethiopia and lost out in the subsequent diplomatic wrangling over a legal verdict by the UN Border Commission. Yet he does not sufficiently reveal the true source and conduct of a foreign policy dictated by Isaias's whims, communicated to the world by the Ministry of Information and executed by his close aide and party official, Yemane Gebreab. Tronvoll and Mekonnen have gone to great lengths to debunk the government's "no peace no war" rationale for its ceaseless militarization, violations of fundamental rights and the deferral of national elections (174). The pretext behind which the government hides is indeed unjustified, yet much of the criticism discounts the role of the international community in creating the excuse in the first place – appeasing Ethiopia's indiscipline and punishing Eritrea for charges of abetting regional instability and terrorism. Eritrea's behaviour is in part a function of international failure to censure Ethiopia's refusal to unconditionally accept the Algiers Peace Agreement. Eritrea's interference in regional affairs is not an exception in the region, nor is it more adverse to regional peace than the actions taken by other countries. Yet the discriminate treatment has only helped to revive Eritrea's historic mistrust of the international community and fears of major-power hostility (particularly from the United States) to its existence. The sanctions imposed in 2009 would have carried more political and moral weight if the target was the government's increasing repression and reluctance to return to a democratic process. Further and imminent sanctions following the ongoing investigations by the UN Commission of Inquiry on human rights violations will only help to alienate it and exacerbate the people's suffering. Absolving the international community from the current crisis and calling for further sanctions is ill conceived and reckless. Isaias's obstinacy knows no bounds and the international community's track record is lamentable. It should mend its ways and accommodate Eritrea by offering carrots rather than just wielding hostile sticks. It is high time to both pressure Ethiopia to end its occupation of Eritrean territories and engage Eritrea to capitalize on Isaias's talk of drafting a new constitution, however tactical and insincere his intentions might be.

Despite its late "accession to independence" and an auspicious start, Eritrea's laudable, but far less consequential, achievements in areas such as infrastructure, gender equality and combating malaria are eclipsed by the bigger shadow it projects – closed, indigent and isolated. The prelude to the current regime is reminiscent of the dismantling of liberal institutions inherited during Africa's decolonization in the early 1960s and

the subsequent personalization of power in the hands of "big men" and hegemony of single parties over national life. Centralization of state power and the subordination of "peripheral" state institutions to the core executive sealed the path to personal rule. This, coupled with economic malaise, resulted in the double "crisis of accumulation" and "governance" that hit neopatrimonial regimes hard after the mid-1970s. Nevertheless, Eritrea's woes seem unprecedented, spurring acrimonious cyber-discourse among Eritrean nationalists and their opponents – political wars fought from the trenches of the liberation-era debate over the character of Eritrea as a colonial versus a national entity. Puzzled by the paradox of the liberation that subjected them to a new form of tyranny, the nationalists see their misfortunes as an "enigma shrouded in mystery" (Giorgis, 323) or a divine curse with Isaias as its messenger. To their detractors, who disparage the struggle as a "march of folly", the crisis is an inescapable outcome of an ill-conceived project. Far from representing the unravelling of an elusive dream, however, the crisis is a quintessential failure of nation-building in Africa, only with its means and ends pronounced by adverse circumstances in Eritrea. Seeing Eritrea from this proper historical perspective helps us to both fathom its present predicament and draw the contours of future change. Authoritarian rule and economic hardships have worsened due to Isaias's iron grip and political callousness, a "coupon economy" serving as a "weapon of repression" (Giorgis, 229) and the excruciating effects of indefinite national service. As the authors show, the uniqueness and genesis of Eritrea's state crisis stem from the national service that turned – with the declaration of the Warsay-Yikealo Development Campaign in 2002 – into "service for life" and an effective instrument of state repression. The ramifications of the project are so extensive and far-reaching that any attempt to understand post-liberation Eritrea is untenable without due emphasis on it. Nor will future reforms be meaningful or rule of law fully redeemed unless the programme is redefined and repurposed to give it a human face.

Despite a few limitations, the authors draw a comprehensive picture of post-liberation Eritrea and its current quandaries. These books are critical for anyone concerned with Eritrea and its future. A peaceful transition to multi-party politics is unlikely under Isaias's watch. However, if anything, it will follow a familiar pattern of transitions from neopatrimonial regimes that are very protracted and unfavourable to democratic consolidation. More often, such transitions result in semi-authoritarian regimes or even new autocracies. This could be further compounded by the elite cohesion, organizational resilience and propensity to violent force that characterize former liberation fronts. Giorgis overlooks both of these

setbacks and, in his calls to reform the PFDJ, downplays the challenges posed by the very political culture and "war machinery" that previously botched the transition. He fails to recognize that a Chinese-style reform path would simply entail market liberalization without democracy and that a developmental state inherently relegates political development and, at worst, is hostile to democracy. Nevertheless, Giorgis's impressive synthesis of theory and experience offers a unique outlook on real policy challenges. Yet, as Giorgis was socialized in an EPLF culture that proscribes sensitive national issues and as he apparently harbours some sympathy for the front, his work suffers from the complete omission of the adverse impact of its policies on national unity.

Devoting two chapters to these issues, *Garrison State* will certainly stimulate the debate on the national identity and constitutional future of Eritrea. It elucidates the discontents of minority groups and the danger of national fragmentation inherent in the country's body politic. The participation and representation of ethnic minorities amounted to little more than a "dance-democracy" in national holidays and cultural festivals (130), with their most crucial rights being "brutally crushed". The official stance against attitudes evoking subnational identity rendered ethnic and religious minorities vulnerable to discrimination and majority domination. The regime's land policy, native education and marginalization of minorities have left a fragile unity forged in the crucible of a protracted revolutionary war fraying at the edges. Minorities view the projection of Tigrigna as a *de facto* national language and the expansion of Christian Tigrigna highlanders to areas outside their historical homeland (particularly the Western lowlands) as a systematic Tigrignanization and dispossession of their native land, analogous to the Amharization and *neftegna* settler-colonization of southern lands in expansionist Abyssinia. The ramifications are widespread and far-reaching, sowing the seeds of future discord along ethnic and regional lines – a fragmentation that is pervasive among the opposition and in the diasporic cybersphere.

Thus, Eritrea's future hangs in a precarious balance. A healthy transition will require not only rebuilding shattered state and democratic institutions, but also a full recognition of minority grievances and institutions guaranteeing their representation, participation and equitable share of national wealth. Only a system of proportional representation devolving power and cultural autonomy to minorities can ensure this.

■ Salih O. Nur